

HEALTHY POST-NATAL CARE

Giving birth is both exhausting and emotional. After the birth, you may feel very tired and with your hormones once again changing, very emotional. Physically, you may feel sore, especially if you have had stitches. A member of your health care team will make sure that you are recovering from the birth and help you with any questions you may have regarding your health or the health of your baby. These pages aim to provide guidance on how to maintain a healthy lifestyle after you have had your baby. You may feel that you don't have the energy to look after yourself. It is essential that you do, so that you are able to look after, and enjoy, your new baby and the rest of your family.

Keep eating a healthy diet

It is very important to maintain a healthy diet. Not only do you need the energy in the short term to look after your baby, a healthy diet will have long term health benefits for you and your family. You may feel that you don't have the time to cook, so try quick, healthy meals like baked potatoes with a variety of fillings (e.g. tuna fish or baked beans).

A healthy diet

- ◆ Bread, other cereals and potatoes (including breakfast cereals, pasta and rice). These foods should make up the main part of your diet.
- ◆ Fruit and vegetables (including fresh, frozen and tinned varieties, salad vegetables, beans and lentils, dried fruit and fruit juice). Eat at least five portions a day (fruit juice counts as only one portion however much you drink in a day).
- ◆ Milk and dairy foods. Eat or drink moderate amounts and choose lower fat versions whenever possible.
- ◆ Meat, fish and alternatives. Alternatives include eggs, beans and lentils, nuts and textured vegetable protein. Eat moderate amounts and choose lower fat versions whenever possible. Try to eat at least one portion of oily fish (e.g. sardines or salmon) a week.
- ◆ Foods containing fat and sugar. Eat sparingly, i.e. infrequently and/or in small amounts.

Your weight and shape

Your body has undergone enormous changes over the last nine months and it is going to take time to get your body back into shape. It may take another nine months or longer.

Immediately after the birth, your tummy will still be a lot larger than it was before you were pregnant. Eating healthily and exercising regularly will help, but don't try to lose weight. Looking after a newborn baby can be very tiring and trying to lose weight after your baby's birth can make it more tiring and hard work than it needs to be.

Breastfeeding

A healthy diet is especially important if you choose to breastfeed. Don't try and lose weight. Breastfeeding is demanding and trying to diet will make you feel even more tired. Breastfeeding uses up the fat stored during pregnancy so will help you lose weight and get your shape back naturally. However, you will still need more calories to meet the demands of breastfeeding and your appetite may increase as well.

The Department of Health advises you to have an extra 450 calories a day during the first month, an extra 530 during the second month and an extra 570 calories in the third month to meet the needs of your baby. Base your diet on the healthy eating guidelines (outlined above) and eat when you feel you need to, having smaller meals and snacks throughout the day rather than one large meal in the evening.

You are likely to feel very thirsty while you are breastfeeding, particularly during the feed itself. Try to drink water rather than tea or coffee.

You can now eat the foods you were advised to avoid during your pregnancy (e.g. cheeses and pate) because your baby is no longer in direct contact with your blood supply. However, whatever you eat and drink passes into your breast milk. Be aware that some foods and drinks may upset your baby and learn to avoid these if you can.

It is a good idea not to drink too much alcohol and try not to drink before a feed. The current recommendation is no more than eight units a week and no more than two units in a day. (A unit = half pint of beer, lager or cider; one glass of wine).

Caffeine may also make your baby irritable so keep intakes of tea, coffee and cola low.

Try not to smoke as nicotine will pass into your baby's bloodstream.

If you, your baby's father or any previous children have a history of hayfever, asthma, eczema or any other allergies, avoid eating peanuts and foods containing peanut products.

It is important to check with your GP or pharmacist that any over-the-counter or prescribed medicines are safe to take while breastfeeding.

Exercise

If you are feeling tired, you probably won't feel like exercising, but exercise can be relaxing, it will help your body recover, ensure you keep fit and will generally make you feel better. Check with one of your health care team before you start exercising after the birth. Walking is ideal. It is on your doorstep, you don't need to drive anywhere and you don't need to find someone to look after your baby. Swimming, post-natal exercise classes or exercise videos are some other suggestions. If you weren't shown post-natal exercises in hospital, ask your midwife to show you some. They will help to improve your shape and strengthen your muscles.

Pelvic floor muscle exercises

It is common to find it difficult to control your bladder after having a baby, particularly when you cough, laugh or sneeze. Daily pelvic floor exercises are essential to help with this problem.

Rest

Looking after a newborn baby is demanding. Your body is also recovering from the rigours of pregnancy and childbirth and if you are feeding through the night, you may become exhausted. It is essential that you rest. It may be tempting to use the time when your baby sleeps during the day to catch up with chores, but it is very important that you have a sleep or rest yourself.

Coping with changes

Your life really will change dramatically. Try not to have unrealistic expectations of yourself. There may be days when you won't manage to finish anything you started and days when you feel you can't cope. You will have to learn to compromise, especially if you are a perfectionist, otherwise you will wear yourself down. You simply won't have the time to do everything that you would like to do and will have to let things go a little.

Your emotions

Changes in your hormone levels may make you feel tearful, irritable, depressed and tired. Often, between three and five days after the birth you may feel particularly low and emotional. This time is referred to as the 'baby blues' and thought to be caused by sudden changes in your hormone levels. It should only last for a few days. Try to rest as much as you can, eat healthily and accept offers of help.

If you often feel depressed and despondent over a period of weeks or months, it is important to talk to one of your health care team.

Support

Support and reassurance are essential, particularly in the early days and weeks. As well as your health care team (e.g. your health visitor) it can be beneficial and enjoyable to talk to other new mothers. Your health visitor may be able to tell you about local mother and baby groups.

Other sources of help

For advice about other issues, e.g. medical problems, sex and contraception, changing relationships and the strain parenthood puts on relationships, your health visitor will be able to advise you on sources of help. You may also find the following contacts useful.

For general support and advice, and breastfeeding:

National Childbirth Trust, Alexandra House, Oldham Terrace, London, W3 6NH. Telephone 0208 992 8637

For breastfeeding:

Association of Breastfeeding Mothers. PO Box 207, Bridgewater, Somerset, TA6 7YT. Telephone 0207 813 1481

La Leche League, BM 3424, London WC1N 3XX. Telephone 0207 242 1278

For depression and stress:

Association for Postnatal Illness, 25 Jerdan Place, London, SW6 1BE. Telephone 0207 386 0868

MAMA (Meet-a-mum Association), 26 Avenue Road, South Norwood, London, SE25 4DX. Telephone: 0208 771 5595

An anonymous telephone helpline:

Parentline. Telephone 0808 800 2222. Helpline 9.00am-9.00pm Monday-Friday; 9.30am-5.00pm Saturday; 10.00am-3.00pm Sunday

For twins and multiple births:

The Multiple Births Foundation. Queen Charlotte's and Chelsea Hospital, Goldhawk Road, London, W6 OXG. Telephone 0208 383 3519

Twins and Multiple Births Association (TAMBA). Harnott House, Little Sutton, South Wirral, L66 1QQ. Telephone 0151 348 0020